



[Antonio Gramsci, 1891-1937](#)

## The Southern Question

It is a mistake to treat Antonio Gramsci's contribution to political thought as substantially separated in time, or in content, from that of Vladimir Lenin and the Bolshevik revolutionary internationalists who were Gramsci's actual contemporaries. Gramsci was in Moscow in 1922 and 1923 and met and married his wife there. As a representative of the Italian Communist Party (PCI), he was familiar with the workings of the Comintern.

Lenin died in 1924. Gramsci was imprisoned by the Italian fascists in November, 1926, and was not released until just before his death, eleven years later, in 1937.

The unfinished 1926 document “Some Aspects of the Southern Question” is the last that Gramsci wrote before his incarceration. To understand its relevance to the National Democratic Revolution, one can begin with the beginning of its third paragraph, where Gramsci says:

*“The Northern bourgeoisie has subjugated the South of Italy and the Islands, and reduced them to exploitable colonies...”*

Northern Italy, where there are many great cities (including Turin, home of the giant FIAT company) was by the first quarter of the twentieth century “developed” in much the same way as France, Germany and England were. But south of Rome, and on the large Italian islands of Sardinia and Sicily, the people lived very differently. In many ways the situation resembled the “Colonialism of a Special Type” that was maturing in South Africa in the same period. Colonised and colonisers were present in the same national territory.

The Italian Southerners were subjected to racial contempt, such that, as Gramsci records:

*“It is well known what kind of ideology has been disseminated in myriad ways among the masses in the North, by the propagandists of the bourgeoisie: the*

*South is the ball and chain which prevents the social development of Italy from progressing more rapidly; the Southerners are biologically inferior beings, semi-barbarians or total barbarians, by natural destiny..."* and so on.

As a communist, Gramsci naturally advocated *"the political alliance between Northern workers and Southern peasants, to oust the bourgeoisie from State power."* He follows this bare formulation with many fascinating incidences and details about the class structure and class dynamics of Italy at the time and during the preceding three decades, which had included the First World War and the subsequent rise of Mussolini's fascists. Gramsci accompanies these narratives with an exceptional sensitivity towards the role of intellectuals, whom he comes close to treating as a distinct class.

Gramsci writes:

*"Intellectuals develop slowly, far more slowly than any other social group, by their very nature and historical function. **They represent the entire cultural tradition of a people, seeking to resume and synthesize all of its history.** This can be said especially of the old type of intellectual: the intellectual born on the peasant terrain. To think it possible that such intellectuals, en masse, can break with the entire past and situate themselves totally upon the terrain of a new ideology, is absurd. It is absurd for the mass of intellectuals, and perhaps it is*

*also absurd for very many intellectuals taken individually as well - notwithstanding all the honourable efforts which they make and want to make.”*

Yet Gramsci regards such an intellectual break as crucial, saying:

*“This is gigantic and difficult, but precisely worthy of every sacrifice on the part of those intellectuals - from North and South - who have understood that only two social forces are essentially national and bearers of the future: the proletariat and the peasants.”*

This introduction has included a lot of quotations, so as to assist readers to navigate through this text in between the many unfamiliar names that are there.

The simple lesson is the same as that of Lenin and the Comintern: Class Alliance will solve the National Question. The Democratic Revolution is a prerequisite for the building of socialism. This is the nature of the National Democratic Revolution.

- The above is to introduce the original reading-text: [Some Aspects of the Southern Question, Gramsci](#).
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